

CHAPTER X.

VULCAN.

VULCAN, or Hephæstus, son of Jupiter and Juno, god of fire and the forge, seldom joined the general council of the gods.

Vulcan's fall. His aversion to Olympus was of old standing. He had once been tenderly attached to his mother, had lavished upon her every proof of his affection, and had even tried to console her when she mourned Jupiter's neglect. On one occasion, intending to punish Juno for one of her usual fits of jealousy, Jupiter hung her out of heaven, fast bound by a golden chain; and Vulcan, perceiving her in this plight, tugged at the chain with all his might, drew her up, and was about to set her free, when Jupiter returned, and, in anger at his son's interference in his matrimonial concerns, kicked him out of heaven.

The intervening space between heaven and earth was so great, that Vulcan's fall lasted during one whole day and night, ere he finally touched the summit of Mount Mosychlus, in the Island of Lemnos.

“From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day; and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith like a falling star,
On Lemnos th' Ægean isle.”

MILTON.

Of course, to any one but a god such a terrible fall would have proved fatal; and even Vulcan did not escape entirely unharmed, for he injured one of his legs, which accident left him lame and somewhat deformed for the remainder of his life.

VULCAN.

Now, although Vulcan had risked so much and suffered so greatly in taking his mother's part, she never even made the slightest attempt to ascertain whether he had reached the earth in safety. Hurt by her indifference and ingratitude, Vulcan vowed never again to return to Olympus, and withdrew to the solitudes of Mount Ætna, where he established a great forge in the heart of the mountain, in partnership with the Cyclopes, who helped him manufacture many cunning and useful objects from the metals found in great profusion in the bosom of the earth.

Among these ingenious contrivances were two golden handmaidens gifted with motion, who attended the god wherever he went, and supported his halting footsteps.

“Two golden statues, like in form and look
To living maidens, aided with firm gait
The monarch's steps.”

HOMER (Bryant's tr.).

Vulcan also devised a golden throne with countless hidden springs, which, when unoccupied, did not present an extraordinary appearance; but as soon as any one ventured to make use of it, the springs moved, and, the chair closing around the person seated upon it, frustrated all attempts to rise and escape from its treacherous embrace.

The golden throne. Vulcan dispatched this throne, when completed, to his mother, who, delighted with its beauty and delicate workmanship, proudly seated herself upon it, and found herself a prisoner. In vain she strove to escape, in vain the gods all gallantly rushed to her assistance. Their united strength and skill proved useless against the cunning springs.

Finally Mercury was sent to Vulcan, primed with a most diplomatic request to honor high Olympus with his presence; but all Mercury's eloquence and persuasions failed to induce the god of the forge to leave his sooty abode, and the messenger god was forced to return alone and report the failure of his attempt.

Then the gods deliberated anew, and decided to send Bacchus, god of wine, hoping his powers of persuasion would prove more effective.

Armed with a flask of his choicest vintage, Bacchus presented himself before Vulcan, and offered him a refreshing draught. Vulcan, predisposed to thirst, and incited to drink by the very nature of his labor, accepted the offered cup, and allowed himself to be beguiled into renewing his potations, until he was quite intoxicated. In this condition, Bacchus led him passive to Olympus, made him release the Queen of Heaven, and urged him to embrace his father and crave forgiveness.

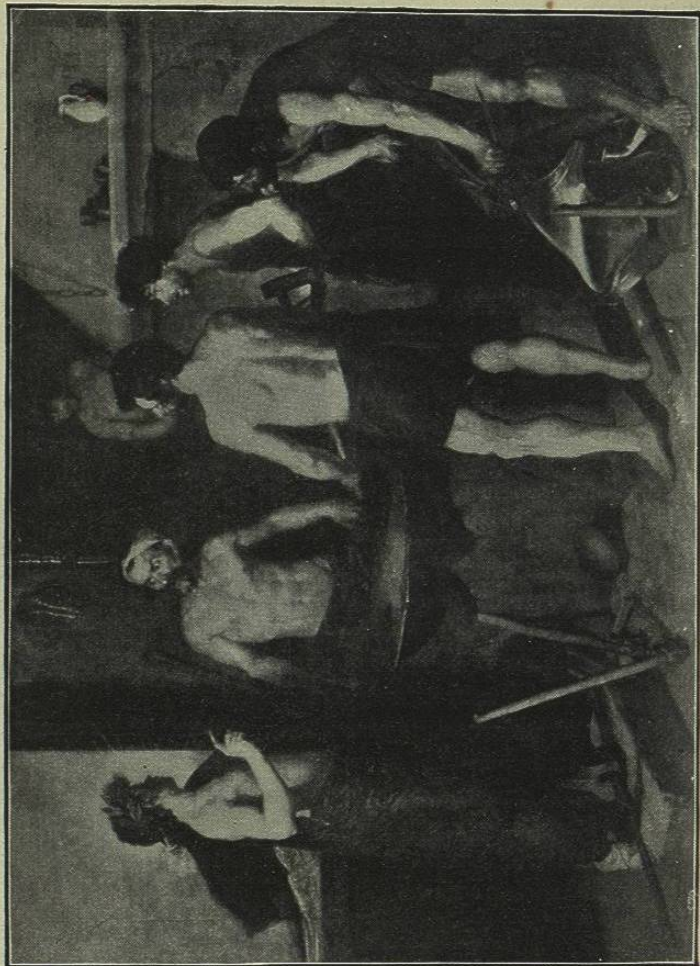
Although restored to favor, Vulcan would not remain permanently in Olympus, but preferred to return to his forge and continue his labors. He undertook, however, the construction of magnificent golden palaces for each of the gods upon the Olympian heights, fashioned their sumptuous furniture from precious metals, and further embellished his work by a rich ornamentation of precious stones.

“Then to their starry domes the gods depart,
The shining monuments of Vulcan’s art:
Jove on his couch reclin’d his awful head,
And Juno slumber’d on the golden bed.”

HOMER (Pope’s tr.).

Aided by the Cyclopes, Vulcan manufactured Jupiter’s weapons, the dread thunderbolts, whose frightful power none could withstand, and Cupid’s love-inspiring darts.

Vulcan, in spite of his deformity, extreme ugliness, and well-known aversion to any home but his sooty forge, was none the less prone to fall in love with the various goddesses. He first wooed Minerva, who, having sworn never to marry, contemptuously dismissed his suit. To console Vulcan for this rebuff, and at the same time punish the Goddess of Beauty, who, according to some mythologists, had refused even his addresses, Jupiter bestowed upon him the fair



FORGE OF VULCAN.—Velasquez. (Museum, Madrid.)

hand of Venus, and sent her and her mischievous train of Loves and Graces to reside in the dark caves of Mount Ætna.

Amused by all the strange sights and sounds, the goddess at first seemed quite contented; but after a time Vulcan's gloomy abode lost all its attractions: so she forsook her ill-favored husband, and went in search of another, more congenial mate.

Some time after, Vulcan married one of the Graces, who, however, seems to have also soon wearied of his society, for she deserted him.

Vulcan's children were mostly monsters, such as Cacus, Periphetes, Cercyon, etc., all of whom play an important part in heroic mythology. He is also the reputed father of Servius Tullius, sixth king of Rome, by a slave Ocrisia, whom he was wont to visit in the guise of a bright flame, which played harmlessly about her.

Vulcan was worshiped by all blacksmiths and artisans, who recognized him as their special patron, and venerated him accordingly.

"Those who labor
The sweaty forge, who edge the crooked scythe,
Bend stubborn steel, and harden gleaming armor,
Acknowledge Vulcan's aid."

PRIOR.

Great festivals, the Vulcanalia and the Hephæstia, were celebrated in honor of this god, who is generally represented as a short, muscular man, with one leg shorter than the other, a workman's cap on his curly locks, a short upper garment, and a smith's tools in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

NEPTUNE.

WHEN Jupiter assigned to each of his brothers a separate portion of the universe, he decreed that Neptune, or Poseidon, should govern all the waters upon the face of the earth, and be sole monarch of the ocean.

"Neptune, the mighty marine god, I sing;
Earth's mover, and the fruitless ocean's king.
That Helicon and th' Ægean deeps dost hold.
O thou earth-shaker; thy command, twofold
The gods have sorted; making thee of horses
The awful tamer, and of naval forces
The sure preserver. Hail, O Saturn's birth!
Whose graceful green hair circles all the earth.
Bear a benign mind; and thy helpful hand
Lend all, submitted to thy dread command."

HOMER (Chapman's tr.).

Before this new ruler made his appearance, the Titan Oceanus had wielded the scepter of the sea; and regretfully he now resigned it to his youthful supplanter, whom he nevertheless admired sincerely, and described in glowing colors to his brothers.

"Have ye beheld the young God of the Seas,
My dispossessor? Have ye seen his face?
Have ye beheld his chariot, foam'd along
By noble winged creatures he hath made?
I saw him on the calmed waters scud,
With such a glow of beauty in his eyes,
That it enforc'd me to bid sad farewell
To all my empire."

KEATS.